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SUBJECT: LEBANON: EMBASSY DELEGATION VISITS UNIFIL, BLUE  
LINE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) An Embassy Beirut delegation visited UNIFIL's Naqoura headquarters and toured the Blue Line area November 14. UNIFIL Commander General Alain Pellegrini and senior officers gave a positive overview of UNIFIL's deployment in the south, but he and top commanders expressed private reticence toward increasing the force level further. There had been good cooperation between UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in implementing UNSCR 1701, but the LAF remains underequipped and its forces in the field may suffer hardship over the winter. Nevertheless, the LAF is highly motivated to meet its responsibility of securing the border area and will likely remain deployed.

¶2. (C) Relations with local residents are generally good, but the introduction of so many new troops from new national contingents has resulted in some friction over road and land use, as well as some cultural misunderstandings. UNIFIL believes that it was these frictions, not political forces opposed to UNIFIL, which were the source of recent negative press articles. Thus far, there has been no detection or confiscation of Hizballah weapons, although there are rumors that Hizballah may be enticing or intimidating local landlords into refusing the use of their land to UNIFIL. UNIFIL officers deem it urgent to find an effective approach to curb Israeli overflights.

¶3. (C) Trilateral UNIFIL-IDF-LAF meetings are continuing and will likely continue for the near future at least, though there has been no softening of the Lebanese side's refusal to formalize the meetings. Meanwhile, UNIFIL has established formal coordination mechanisms with the LAF and IDF both locally and in capitals, and an LAF officer is stationed full-time on the flagship of the UNIFIL maritime force. Meanwhile, the mandates and rules of engagement for both UNIFIL and UNTSO are undergoing scrutiny in New York.

¶4. (C) The delegation's tour of the Blue Line took it past several former Hizballah positions which had been destroyed, some of which have been subsequently occupied by the LAF. The damage to Shia areas is great, in particular to Bint Jbeil, whereas many Christian villages seem relatively untouched. Many areas along the Line are near-ideal for guerilla warfare against a mechanized army, and some Hizballah positions had survived long Israeli bombardment and

shelling before succumbing to ground attack. Finally, Hizballah flags continue to fly over a large number of houses, and the delegation believed that it was under close Hizballah surveillance for most if not all of its movements. End Summary.

15. (SBU) An Embassy Beirut delegation consisting of Polchief, Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) Chief, RSO and A/RSO, and Poloffs visited United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Headquarters in Naqoura, at the westernmost point of the Israeli-Lebanese border, on November 14. The delegation met with UNIFIL Commander Major General Alain Pellegrini and received detailed briefings from senior UNIFIL and UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) officers. The delegation then toured the Blue Line from Naqoura to Rmeish, guided by UNIFIL officers, and passed through the heavily damaged village of Bint Jbeil. UNIFIL staff were exceptionally accommodating and generous to the Embassy delegation. End Summary.

#### DEPLOYMENTS AND FORCE LEVELS

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16. (C) General Alain Pellegrini, a French officer who has headed up UNIFIL for over two years and who plans to leave UNIFIL and retire in early 2007, received the delegation at his office for a half-hour meeting. Pellegrini gave an upbeat assessment of the ongoing cooperation between UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Currently, there are over 10,000 UNIFIL troops deployed, including 1,700 serving in the maritime forces monitoring the coast. Pellegrini was confident that UNIFIL was meeting its mandated role under UN Security Council Resolution 1701 of monitoring the cessation

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of hostilities and assisting the LAF in its deployment of troops to establish control of Lebanon's borders. Coordination between UNIFIL and the LAF, from the command level down, had been very good, he said.

17. (C) Pellegrini admitted that the introduction of several new nationalities to the UNIFIL force mix had resulted in some minor tensions. While UNIFIL officers comprise a mix of several nationalities, Pellegrini has appeared in his interactions with diplomats to rely most heavily on his top French officers, including his deputy, General Philippe Stoltz, and Colonel Alexandre Lalane-Berdouticq. All three of these French officers will depart UNIFIL within the next few months, to be replaced by Italian officers and an Italian UNIFIL commander. The timing of this turnover, according to one French officer, has been the source of some friction with Rome, they told us.

18. (C) Pellegrini indicated that the expanded UNIFIL had in general received a warm welcome from local residents. However he expressed concern over the possible impact of a large number of new troops on local residents' goodwill. When asked about UNIFIL's three-phase approach of installing new troop contingents, Pellegrini confided in Polchief that the "phase" terminology was his own invention, to create a premise for slowing the introduction of new troops. (Without saying so overtly, Pellegrini seemed skeptical that UNIFIL should grow to 15,000 troops, at least in the south.) He said that UNIFIL's force level should count maritime force personnel as well as ground troops in arriving at the 15,000 level.

19. (C) Polchief later approached Colonel Lalane-Berdouticq in a pull-aside to ask his view of the appropriate force level. He replied that the area south of the Litani is already crowded with LAF and UNIFIL troops and that adding more soldiers to the area could not improve security, but might prove counterproductive by engendering local hostility. He noted that roads had been increasingly damaged since the war by the introduction of thousands of military vehicles, and that local residents frequently expressed frustration at the

large vehicles clogging thoroughfares.

¶10. (C) UNIFIL is countering this resentment with outreach programs including medical treatment for residents, but its resources are limited. According to Pellegrini, UNIFIL and other aid programs are all too often used as an excuse for the central government to continue to neglect the south. UNIFIL is trying to find a balance that keeps pressure on the GOL to be present in the region.

#### HIZBALLAH'S CHALLENGE

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¶11. (C) When Polchief inquired about possible Hizballah rearming in the south, Pellegrini replied that no large cache of Hizballah weapons had been located or confiscated. He qualified his remark by noting that UNIFIL does not search private homes. However, Pellegrini added that under his interpretation of UNIFIL's rules of engagement, if any such weapons are found in the open, UNIFIL would notify the LAF and, if necessary, take action on its own to confiscate those weapons. Finally, he observed that Hizballah's freedom of movement and of action in the south is extremely limited now due to the massive influx of troops from UNIFIL and the LAF.

¶12. (C) General Pellegrini indicated that UNIFIL was still having trouble securing land use rights from local residents and landlords, and informed us he had heard Hizballah was pressuring landowners not to lease their land to UNIFIL. Other top UNIFIL officers blamed landlords' reluctance on what they allege is the GOL's continuing failure to fulfill its obligations to pay landlords, despite the GOL's October 2006 cabinet decision to do so.

#### TERRORISTS AND OVERFLIGHTS

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¶13. (C) When asked about press reports of UNIFIL troop misbehavior, such as the report of Italian soldiers stealing from a local shop and of Spanish troops searching private homes for arms, Pellegrini denied the reports and attributed

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them to cultural differences, rumor and misperception at the local level. The south has been occupied by foreign armies for most of the past several decades, he pointed out, and no matter how hard UNIFIL tries to promote goodwill, it will always be seen by some as a foreign occupying force. The many different nationalities represented only serve to multiply cultural barriers.

¶14. (C) Neither Pellegrini nor Colonel Lalane-Berdouticq believed the press stories were attributable to political forces hostile to UNIFIL's mission. The two officers also saw no threat to UNIFIL in an alleged al-Qaeda threat the previous day to bring down the government of Prime Minister Siniora, nor did they express particular concern that UNIFIL may be exposed to terrorist attack.

¶15. (C) Pellegrini did, however, express growing concern over continuing Israeli overflights in Lebanese airspace, and said that current pressure had not made enough of an impact on Israel. The overflights represent a danger for his troops on the ground, he averred, and he is willing to propose to UN Headquarters a change in the rules of engagement to allow UNIFIL to respond with force. While admitting that UNHQ would not likely approve such a change, Pellegrini complained that other avenues of engaging the Israelis on this issue are not producing results.

#### TRILATERAL MEETINGS AND OTHER COORDINATION

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¶16. (C) Pellegrini confirmed for us that trilateral meetings, in which representatives from the IDF and LAF sit in the same room and interact with each other via UNIFIL officers, are

ongoing in Naqoura on a weekly basis. The only subject discussed in recent meetings has been the delayed IDF withdrawal from the village of Ghajjar. (The delegation would later see the border checkpoint, the only official border crossing on the Lebanon-Israel border, through which IDF officers cross to the Lebanese side to attend these meetings.) When asked by Polchief, Pellegrini expected the trilateral meetings to continue even after the resolution of the Ghajjar issue. Polchief hoped that the meetings would become institutionalized, at least informally; Pellegrini allowed for this possibility but doubted that the Lebanese side would accede to any formalized arrangement.

¶17. (C) Pellegrini noted that work to establish UNIFIL coordination cells with the two militaries is well-advanced. There is now a UNIFIL coordination cell in Tel Aviv and in the LAF headquarters at Yarza, outside of Beirut. There is informal coordination with the LAF in the south (LAF Commander General Michel Sleiman delegates, Pellegrini admitted, but "in a Middle Eastern manner") and some more formalized coordination with the IDF takes place via mobile phone and radio. In addition, there is a Lebanese officer stationed full-time on the flagship of the maritime patrol force, a German command frigate.

#### LAF CAPABILITIES AND FUTURE

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¶18. (C) Regarding the LAF's future, Pelligrini told Embassy ODC Chief that the LAF needs to focus on building its capabilities not as a means to challenge Hizbollah but as a means to provide a viable alternative to it. The LAF needs to concentrate inward on asserting control of Lebanon's internal scene rather than concentrating on the nearly impossible goal of fighting the Israeli military. Pellegrini admitted that it will be politically difficult for the Lebanese government to follow this course, but ultimately necessary for the LAF to fulfill UNSCR 1701 and achieve UNIFIL's eventual departure from southern Lebanon.

#### BRIEFINGS

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¶19. (C) Following the meeting with Pellegrini, 12-15 of UNIFIL's top officers gathered to brief the Embassy delegation for the next hour and a half on UNIFIL's expansion and maritime component, UNIFIL coordination with the LAF, and the UNTSO Observer Group Lebanon (OGL) mission. While much of the briefing material had been shown to Emboffs and

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third-country diplomats in previous briefings, there had been several updates. Among the notable points brought out in the three briefings were:

-- There has been much misunderstanding about the meaning of the Blue Line, a withdrawal line and not an international border. The Israeli "technical fence" is in most places a few hundred meters into the Israeli side of the Blue Line. As a result, Israeli work on the fence and even moving the position of the fence is often interpreted by the Lebanese side as a border violation. Furthermore, many Lebanese civilians have accidentally crossed the Blue Line, resulting in reported border violations.

-- UNIFIL's mandate continues to be subject to revision. Briefers used some ambiguity in the definition of "hostile activities" as cited in paragraph 12 of Resolution 1701. When asked by Polchief for details, the briefers admitted the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has staffed a Strategic Military Cell to examine this definition. Activities such as movements, observation, photography, construction, overflights, and many others could be considered hostile in some contexts.

-- The LAF Navy's chief need, according to German Navy

Captain Becker, is for land-based radars for maritime interdiction. (The previous radar installations were destroyed during the July-August conflict.) Following this, the LAF needs patrol boats to stop smuggling.

-- The UNIFIL maritime operation is the first-ever UN peacekeeping operation to include a maritime contingent, according to Captain Becker. (After the briefing, Captain Becker told Polchief that Berlin has authorized the German Navy to operate for one year as part of UNIFIL. Any longer deployment would have to be reapproved by the German government.)

-- German Navy assets participated directly in the publicized apprehension of a small boat smuggling cigarettes from Syria in early November, though UNIFIL allowed the LAF to take the credit. German warships tracked the boat and another related vessel across Lebanese and Syrian waters and assisted the Lebanese Navy boat to interdict the smuggler.

-- UNIFIL has no separate budget for its humanitarian assistance programs. Those programs are funded from UNIFIL's operational budget, with the rationale that the humanitarian programs build trust among local residents.

-- UNTSO's OGL observers operate side-by-side with UNIFIL personnel and feed reports through the same chain of command, but they are only active during the daylight hours. UNTSO observers have no night-vision capability.

-- A possible retooling of UNTSO's mission is currently under discussion in New York. Past proposals have included expanding the observer's area of operations to the Syrian border.

-- UNIFIL officers were unanimous that the LAF is determined and highly committed to meeting its deployment responsibilities in the south. However, the LAF has many deficiencies in training, and in areas such as monitoring, patrolling, and maintenance.

-- The most pressing equipment need is to prepare the LAF for the winter by providing support items such as tents, winter jackets, fuel and housing facilities. Despite their woeful unpreparedness for the winter, the LAF will remain deployed in its positions in the south, according to all our UNIFIL interlocutors.

-- Other LAF equipment requirements include: proper night vision equipment for monitoring the border at night and spare parts for UH-1 helicopters.

-- Currently the LAF's main armored personnel carrier (APV) is the U.S.-made M-113. The UNIFIL assessment is that many of the APV's are not in fully operational condition and parts are badly needed to keep the best vehicles in operation. UNIFIL's assessment is based on an informal study of movement

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patterns.

-- The expected delivery of 300 HMMWV's from the U.S. in the coming months as well as spares and repairs for current vehicles should provide transport relief. UNIFIL officers cautioned us that Spanish troops were exposed to harassment by locals who resented the fact that they used HMMWV vehicles, which locals associate with the Israeli military. One of the briefers advised us that the LAF might wish to avoid using US-procured HMMWV's in the south as a result of this perception.

BLUE LINE TOUR  
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120. (C) The delegation toured much of the Blue Line in the afternoon, beginning at UNIFIL HQ in Naqoura and driving



within a kilometer or two (often within a few meters) of the Blue Line and the Israeli technical fence eastward through several villages to Rmeish, the farthest point east on the trip.

¶21. (C) Beginning from Naqoura, a thick electrical wire paralleled the road for a few kilometers. A UNIFIL officer riding in our car, a captain from the Ghana Battalion, explained that the wire had been laid by Hizballah fighters prior to or during the July-August war to supply electrical power to rocket launchers close to the road (and presumably also to Hizballah's fortified positions). There had been a heavily fortified emplacement for rocket launching, including a large tunnel complex, only a few kilometers outside Naqoura. The IDF shelled the position repeatedly during the war but only the Israeli ground offensive was, with great difficulty, able to stop Hizballah from launching rockets from it.

¶22. (C) The terrain surrounding Naqoura is ideal for guerrilla fighters opposing a mechanized army, our guide explained. We saw that the area comprises short rocky hills separated by narrow wadis which any vehicle, armored or unarmored, would have difficulty negotiating. The area is also filled with thick scrub brush, making concealment easier. While there were a few shepherds guiding flocks, the area just outside Naqoura is only sparsely inhabited.

¶23. (C) Within the first few kilometers from UNIFIL HQ, our guide pointed out to us several former Hizballah positions which had been destroyed by the IDF. Most of them seem to have been built from scrap metal, scrap concrete, and other building materials which may have been available from the area's many construction sites. One of the former Hizballah positions, a hilltop inside a bend in the Blue Line, had been occupied by the LAF. A large prefab structure had been erected and a single M113 stood guard surrounded by a new earthen berm.

¶24. (C) The road began to run through several villages. Majority-Shia villages had been heavily damaged, and our guide pointed us to several former Hizballah firing positions within those villages. Most of these were houses which had been wrecked by IDF attacks. Hizballah flags continued to fly over several structures. The Christian villages we passed through, on the other hand, were relatively unharmed.

¶25. (C) The delegation's convoy passed by several GhanaBatt positions (usually a gated complex with a high concrete wall) and GhanaBatt HQ. The convoy stopped at several places including a GhanBatt position within a few meters of the technical fence. A Hizballah position had been nearby. A mixed collection of shell casings attested to fighting -- M16 5.56 spent and live ammunition and AK-47 7.62 casings littered the ground. At another high point along the Line, no more than a kilometer from an Israeli artillery base under which the road passed, the LAF had taken over another Hizballah position and moved in prefab structures.

¶26. (C) Finally, on the way back to the road that would take the delegation through Tyre and back to Beirut, the convoy passed through Bint Jbeil, which was the most heavily damaged town we encountered. Of the structures we could see from our drive through, perhaps half were totally destroyed or had suffered clear structural damage to an extent sufficient to

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render them unusable. The remainder were heavily damaged and would clearly require expensive rehabilitation. The delegation was not in a position to see all of Bint Jbeil nor to undertake a systematic survey of the damage, but the destruction was impressive.

¶27. (C) It is worth noting that at several points along the delegation's movements from Naqoura along the Line, up to Bint Jbeil and back to Tyre, surveillance of the delegation

was detected. It was presumed that that surveillance was  
carried out by Hizballah.  
FELTMAN